

Countdown to Sanity  
UUCS Sermon – 8/7/2011  
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Today, I want to ask you a question: are you living the life you want to live? I believe that it's not only possible for you to live that life; I think it's your responsibility. So I'm going to ask you again: are you living the life you want to live?

Hold that question for a bit, and let's come back to it. To get back to it, there are three things I want to talk about. The first is that the world is insane, the second is that it's possible to live a more sane life, and the third is that there is a way to get to that saner life.

But in the end, we'll come back to the question, are you living the life you want to live?

Let's start with something on which you would likely agree: we live in an insane world.

The pace of change is nearly overwhelming – every day we get too much information, over too many channels, and there's too little downtime. We can't keep up, and it's costing us.

It's costing us. The quality of dialogue is deteriorating. Listening is becoming a lost art; tolerance, let alone respect, for alternative points of view is almost non-existent; and many of us spend much more time thinking about the point *we* are trying to make rather than listening to the point the other person is trying to make.

To confirm this, you have only to look as far as the recent “debate” – and I use that term very loosely – on the debt ceiling. For that matter, much of the “dialogue” – and again I use that term loosely – between differing religious beliefs is another great example, and even in our own church I often sense a mutual disrespect between those who do believe in God, in some form or fashion, and those who don't.

Whatever definition of insanity you happen to like – my personal favorite is “*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results*” - I doubt many would argue with the contention that the world around us is ... if not insane ... at least doing a great imitation of it.

Next, I want to spend a little time building a model of life that could lead us to something saner, and this is where the title of today's sermon came from.

Actually, I called it *countdown* to sanity, but I probably should have called it *counting up* to sanity. Here's how it goes. This is my formula for my own sanity, by the way – it may or may not fit for you, but I hope it contains some value for you.

One. The human mind has *one* over-riding desire, and that is for the world to make sense. To this end, whatever we encounter, our *one* main mental activity is to *create meaning*.

When we perceive something in the world, we name it.

When we perceive a thought or a feeling inside ourselves, we try to make sense of it.

When we hear something that challenges our reality or our well-being, we assess the threat and try

to neutralize it.

In short, we create a *meaning* that captures both the threat and gives us an immediate response to that threat.

Two. Everything has *two* faces. Comedy makes no sense without tragedy, life makes no sense except in contrast to death; young/old, smart/dumb, calm/agitated, the list goes on. Nothing makes sense except as compared to an opposite. Duality is the essential nature of our created reality.

Three. Here my Buddhist inclinations come out, but I could just as easily have gone with the Trinity of my Catholic upbringing. Regardless, spirituality seems to come packaged in threes, wherever I look – Unitarianism notwithstanding.

For the Buddhist, there are three refuges, where Buddhist beliefs are held safe: the Buddhist takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The Catholic takes refuge in the Trinity, the father, the son, and the holy spirit.

Don't like those, because you're uncomfortable with spirituality and/or religion? Try this on for size: The first of these, Buddha or the Father, is simply something larger than ourselves. The second, the Dharma or the Son, is the teaching that will lead the way to something better. The third, the Sangha or the Holy Spirit, is community.

Even if you are atheist, do you not believe in something larger than yourself? Do you not believe that it's possible to get somewhere better, and do you not follow some path to try to improve your lot in life? And finally, do you not partake of a community of like-minded, or like-believing, people?

Four. Four is the number that is most often associated with earth, with the solid, with reality. Three dimensions describes space, but reality takes a fourth dimension, time. Jung describes the four functions of the psyche, Don Miguel Ruiz described the Four Agreements (a great little book I recommend to you as a roadmap to a better life, by the way), there are four directions to the compass.

Four is the number that describes the "you are here" in the universe. However you want to take it, think of this: in order to get somewhere new, you need to know where you are. That's what the number four is all about.

Before I get to five, let's go back to the beginning of this talk. Remember the question I asked you? I asked, are you living the life you really want to live? Now I'm going to ask that question again, in a very specific way.

The "*five*" in the countdown isn't actually about a number, it's about a book I read recently, and which I wrote about in *The Moments Project*. The book is called *The Five Wishes*, by Dr. Gay Hendricks.

The premise of the book is deceptively simple, and I'm going to ask you to join me in an experiment, because of the other thing I said in connection with the question, and that is that not only do I think it's possible to live the life you want to live – I think it's your responsibility to do so.

So try this with me: Get as comfortable in your chair as you can. Close your eyes if it helps you to

relax and get focused, or leave your eyes softly open but unfocused. Be aware of your breathing, and just gently let it slow down. Take a deep breath or two, inhaling gently but fully, and letting any tension in your body drain out of you as you exhale. Take your time. Let your mind's eye turn inward, and just let yourself get focused.

Now, I want you to imagine that you are on your deathbed. You have very little time left, and there is no miracle cure that will give you any more time. You are out of time. The end is upon you.

And as you lie there, I am going to ask you a question. Ready? Here it comes.

*Was your life a complete success?* Use any definition you want, because on your deathbed the only definition that matters is yours.

Here it is again: *Was your life a complete success?*

Maybe because the world we live in is so insane, it turns out that the answer to that question, for most of us, sadly, will be, "No." For almost everyone, it seems, when we actually do this thought experiment in earnest there is at least one way in which we find that our life was *not* a complete success. In other words, nearly everyone will answer "No," at least in some way, to the first question I posed: "Are you living the life you want to live?"

Because if you were, then you wouldn't answer "no" to my deathbed question, right?

Now, remembering that I said it's possible to change that, we're not done. Stay with me for a minute, on your deathbed, and ask yourself, "*What would have made my life a complete success?*" What could you have done that would have changed your answer? Take a moment and let yourself ponder that one, until you have something in mind.

Be totally clear about it. *What would have made your life a complete success?* Several things might come to mind – just pick one for now.

To give you an example, when I did this the first thing that came to my mind was that my life wasn't a complete success because I missed too much of it. My life wasn't a complete success because I spent too much of it worrying about something that might happen in the future, or regretting something that had happened in the past – and about which there was nothing I could do. I found myself on my deathbed wishing I'd spent more of my life in the present, because there was so much I'd simply missed.

So, to make my life a complete success, I wish I'd shown up more.

Now, got something of your own? Ok, now I want you to form an intention around it. In order for this to work the best, it should be worded in the present.

*What can you do, starting right now that would make your life a complete success by changing your deathbed wish into reality?* Frame it in the present tense.

For me, my first wish turned into an intention like this: *My life is a complete success because I am present for each moment. When I find myself regretting something in the past, I close unfinished business when I can, and when I can't I take a deep breath and let go. When I find myself worrying*

*about the future, I count my present blessings.*

A coach with whom I've been working wasn't sure about this one, by the way, because she said that it assumed that I would still worry about the future sometimes, and that I would have regret sometimes.

But for me, that was important to recognize. My life isn't going to be a success by magic, and I wouldn't always be in the frame of mind that allowed me to be fully present. I wanted a roadmap, something I could *do* when I caught myself not living successfully. So I built that in. But the intention is still the same. *My life is a complete success because I am present for each moment.*

Now, last question, and it's a hard one, maybe the hardest of all. *Are you willing to commit whatever it takes to make your intention a reality?* Take your time. If the answer is "no," maybe it's not really important enough, so perhaps you need to pick something else.

Or maybe you don't believe it's possible, in which case you may not have a *present* action that you can do that makes your intention a reality.

Work with it, play with it, try it out. What have you got to lose?

I'm not selling a panacea here, or some pipedream.

Have chronic health problems that mean that you aren't able to do everything you once did? Feeling older, and slower, and more forgetful than you once were? Feeling discouraged by our political system, or people dumping tires in creeks and on church property? Feeling as though you have the wrong job, or a bad job, or your boss is a jerk?

So what?

If you aren't living the life you want to lead, you have two choices. Keep doing what you're doing, and end up on your deathbed realizing that you let important things go undone. Or, you can change.

And when you change, when you feel more fulfilled in your life, those around you do, too. I've seen it happen over and over, and so have you.

You've been with people who are sick, or poor, or handicapped in some way, and yet they seem to have found some secret to life that ends up making you feel better.

You've also been with people who seem to have it all, and yet seem uncomfortable in their own skin, and leave you feeling as though you've had the life sucked out of you by being in their company. Right?

Which of those kinds of people do you think will end up on their deathbed feeling as though their life was successful?

Which one do you want to be?

Think about that one for just a moment.

Now, right now, what are you going to do about it?

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